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ABSTRACT

Social workers in rural midwestern areas such as Iowa must consider distinctive characteristics of the poor in those areas to help clients within the framework of family and community. Characteristics of rural poor include presence of father in family, residence in small towns with a single industry, presence of high numbers of female elderly, community skepticism of social welfare programs and denial of poverty conditions, independence and rugged individualism as societal values, distant or nonexistent social services, intolerance of difference, predominance of primary or kin relationships, lack of anonymity, less mobility, more stigmatization. The social worker practicing in these areas must be a generalist, autonomous, and self-directed, needs to be creative in developing resources, and must provide a very personal type of service. Intervention must emphasize family and community and focus on short-term practical goals. Social workers must help the poor family meet physical needs, mobilize family strengths, teach the family to develop goals and to reach them, mobilize support system networks within the community and the extended family, advocate for the client and also on behalf of service agencies if the client is reluctant, develop resources within the community, and educate the community about the extent and cause of poverty. (LFL)

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Distinctive Features of Mid-West Rural Poverty: Implications for Social Work Practice

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Distinctive Features of Mid-West Rural Poverty: Implications for Social Practice.

In the Northeast area of the country, poverty is inescapable from the view of the average citizen. One knows of the existence of the urban ghetto with its mostly minority and poor inhabitants. Rural Iowa, which will be discussed as a representative mid-west state, does not have the ghetto's counterpart, or a significant minority population; and in a country that often erroneously views poverty as a non-white phenomenon, there is a tendency among Iowans to feel that the state is relatively free from the problems of poverty. Rural mid-west poverty is distinctive from urban poverty and is even different from rural poverty in other areas of the country in its visibility. Drive a rural road in Iowa, and you won't find the shanties that are scattered throughout the Carolina countryside, or find the dirt floored shack of the Kentucky hollow. Nevertheless statistics indicate that Iowa has significant problems. Iowa's image as "the nation's breadbasket" makes it difficult for many to accept that there is a problem with poverty in Iowa. The invisibility of the poor in the mid-west, and the concurrent lack of recognition

of the problem, create difficulties for the poor, and for the social worker with a commitment to this constituency. It is the purpose of this paper to document this problem, describe its characteristics, as well as to suggest methods of intervention based on the difference of rural poverty.

Statistical Documentation of Poverty

It is perhaps a bit dry to cite statistics, but it is necessary to demonstrate the extent of the problem. According to Mary Louise Filke, head of the Department of Social Services Bureau of Planning and Analysis, "little data has been collected on rural poverty, or the special needs of the poor population".[1] This in itself is an indication of the state's policy and priorities in this area. Nevertheless, some statistics are available and will be listed below.

1. The U.S. Bureau of the Census reported that 225,000 Iowans live below the poverty line.[2] This statistic in itself is an increase of 30% from the 1960 census.[3] In addition, the number of rural poor has been growing faster than the poor population in urban areas. The 1960 Census indicated that one half of the poor lived in rural areas, while the Census Bureau's most recent numbers indicate that 72% of the state's poor population lived in rural areas.[5]

It is important to note that the rural poor in the region don't live on farms, but rather they live near and in and around small towns. They are only peripherally involved with farming.

It should also be noted that the so-called poverty line as used to indicate poverty is wholly inadequate. The income level used in the latest figures in this paper was $109 a week for a family of four. One is poor long before reaching this line. Actual need exceeds statistics.

2. The anti-hunger project commissioned by the National Council of Churches done in 1979 identified Decatur County as one of the fifteen poorest counties in the country.[6] This study along with another conducted by the Social Action Division of the Catholic Council for Social Concern found widespread poverty in the Southern and Southwestern counties of the state.[7] Both these studies found particularly severe problems among the elderly. Malnutrition was found among this group coupled with a low-level utilization of services meant to alleviate hunger. This low level of utilization will be discussed at length later in the paper.

3. This Census Bureau report also indicates that only twelve states have more rural poor than Iowa. The tragedy is somewhere hidden among the cornfields are an awful lot of poor who do not get enough to eat.

A Profile of the Poor

A profile of the poor indicates family structure is likely to be intact among the rural poor. The father is probably in the home which is a significant difference from the urban poor. This situation may be changing because divorce is becoming more commonplace among rural residents. There has been a two-thirds increase in the divorce rate in the State of Iowa since 1960. This structural change in the family has led to an increase of women-headed families since the last census. A national phenomenon recently has been identified - called the feminization of poverty. Women headed families are more likely to be poor than a male headed family.

Iowa community action agencies report the poor tend to become poor through reasons beyond their control. Reasons given for poverty are divorce, illness, death of a breadwinner, and the overall poor state of the economy that have led to an increase in unemployment.

Many small towns are dependent on a single industry for their well-being. In a weak economy, these towns are particularly vulnerable to downturns in the economy since there aren't other industries to absorb layoffs from the single industry.

Another feature of mid-west rural poverty is linked to the high percentage of elderly found in rural communities. These elderly are likely to be female, and as a group this group is found in poverty conditions at a higher rate than other groups in society.

Other Distinctive Features of Rural Poverty

One of the easiest ways to define poverty is to simply say that it involves lack of money, but in our society it means much more than this. Our society hates its poor. The Calvinist work ethic confuses poverty with moral turpitude. One is expected to be a rugged individual and stand on one's own two feet. Rugged individualism may have served the frontier well, but in a modern complex interdependent society this myth is out of place. What is important to remember is that the values of the frontier have hung on in the rural areas much longer than urban areas. The rural poor problems are compounded by feedback from their communities that challenges their self-worth. These conservative values are found to be held by the rural poor themselves. While pride and individualism are values to be admired and supported, they are also values which can act as an effective barrier to utilization of services. Finding ways of helping that are not degrading, and enable an individual to keep his dignity is very important for the deliverer of

human services. The social worker also needs to find ways to educate the community about the causes and meaning of poverty in our society. More about these issues in the practice part of this paper.

Since the residents of rural areas are likely to be conservative. They tend to be more skeptical of social welfare programs than their urban counterparts. A number of studies found that those who hold conservative values were more likely to deny the existence of poverty in their midst.[9] Dealing with these persistent attitudes is necessary for change.

Rural areas share a skepticism of far-off governments providing assistance -- be that government Des Moines or Washington. And rural governments don't like their intervention, and would rather intervene themselves for fear of losing local control. Rural governments are either unwilling to go after funds or perhaps lack sophistication needed to garner scarce funding. A rural personality characteristic is that the people tend to be locality oriented rather than cosmopolitan in outlook as the urban resident is. The rural citizen is more interested in what goes on in their own community than in the rest of the world.[10] There is a lot of pride in taking care of their own. However, this desire to take care of their own does not extend

to those who are seen as deviant. The general conservative residual view of poverty that is prevalent in rural areas would cause the rural resident to view the poor as deviant.

The rural poor brought up on the outdated notion of rugged individualism experience difficulties in asking for help, which is partially accountable for the low level utilization of services. Not only does asking for help go against the community norm, but also those who ask for help stand a chance of being held up to community scorn. One does not have protective anonymity of the big city. One can hear reports of social workers who have lost clients because the client has run into someone they know in the waiting room. In order to help people utilize services you have to help the individuals deal with feelings that would hinder the use of services.

Another problem which works against the utilization of services is the problem of distance, and lack of transportation. Even if the poor own a car, running a car back and forth to the agency can be cost prohibitive; and, of course, in many instances mass transportation is not available. One answer to this problem is to reach out with services, through outpost or satellites, but this, of course, can develop a problem of spreading services too thin.

A similar problem in regard to utilization of services might be that services are nonexistent or remote. Small counties may not have the finances to support services, or the population to support many specialized services. If you go to the town's doctor and find that you need a specialist, you will probably have to go to an urban center for treatment. The same situation holds true for social services. Specialist services are not available and the rural social worker thus is expected to be a generalist who can do anything and everything. One answer to the lack of specialized services is to regionalize services, but that solution of centralizing services moves service away from many potential recipients. The solutions to the problem of distance and specialization as you can see work against each other.

Many rural states and likewise rural areas within states may feel it is to their advantage to keep services sparse and poor on the theory that if services and benefits were good, it might draw in recipients from urban areas. Dislike of outsiders, particularly urbanites is a constant theme in rural communities.

Rural and Urban Areas Compared

A few words on rural and urban differences are necessary before moving into a discussion of practice considerations.

Population Rural towns are of course small. One of the by-products of being small is communities tend to be homogeneous. Iowa as a state is one of the most homogeneous in the country. The minority population hovers at around 1 to 2% of the population. Most of the minority population is located in urban areas. Rural communities tend to be white with each town settled by one ethnic/religious groups. These homogeneous communities are easy to administer, but tend to be intolerant of difference. Poverty level clients are seen as different in their communities.

Culture Richard Dewey suggests urbanism is a trait that should be given to an entire society rather than an individual community. Our overall society is urban in outlook, and rural communities are gradually being swept into an overall societal trend in the direction of urbanization, which will obscure differences between urban and rural areas. Nevertheless, Iowa, unlike the "New South", still is primarily an agricultural state, and rural values may be more deeply entrenched here than in other areas of the country. The entire mid-west is experiencing a loss of population, rather than an influx of people, that is

changing the culture of other agricultural regions of the country. Social work practice, as the principle goes, should take into account the values of the population served.

One aspect of culture in rural areas which differs from urban areas is that primary rather secondary relationships predominate. People are deeply embedded in kin networks. These kin networks are both sources of strength and hindrance in helping, and will be discussed as such under the practice section of the paper.

The rural resident, and this includes worker and client, lacks the anonymity of the urban area. Deviance that would be ignored in the large city would not be overlooked in the rural area. The close-knit rural community, as the myth goes, has less need for formal organizations to carry out both social control and support functions. As discussed earlier, however, statistics indicate rural areas are dealing well with the issue of poverty.

Another aspect of culture is that status is more likely ascribed through personal characteristics, rather than what someone does. This has two consequences for the poor. Mobility is not as easy in the rural area as it is in the city, and you may come from a family with unfavorable characteristics ascribed to it, which may make it difficult for a member of that family to break out of that status.

Practice

The differences involved in rural practice have been discussed by a number of people. One of the core differences noted is the generalist rather than specialist perspective of the worker.[11] The rural worker needs to be flexible since he could be asked to do almost anything. The rural worker finds himself as the prime source of help in the community. The worker also finds himself more isolated from peers, and maybe the worker doesn't receive adequate supervision because none is available.

The small rural agency is likely to be less bureaucratic than its urban counterpart, which is probably looked on as a blessing by many workers. The smallness of the agency and isolation of the worker demand that the worker be autonomous and self-direct . The worker also finds that he has fewer formal resources available to assist clients. The worker therefore needs to be creative in developing resources. These resources exist or are laying dormant in the community, such as the family, which was already discussed as an important part of rural life, and other resources in the community, such as church and service organizations. Both the family and the community context should be the focus of rural practice. The lack of formal resources often leads to a very personal

type of service delivery. In the urban center where one might refer an unemployed client to job service, the rural social worker might have to help the client make contact with prospective employers directly. These types of situations have the good point of removing bureaucracy and deepening the relationship between worker and client. Let's consider the family and community in detail.

Intervention With The Poverty Level Family

A beginning phase of intervention should include an initial interview with the family for the purpose of supporting solidarity and cohesiveness within the family. The worker should help the family organize itself to deal with the problem by focusing on those elements of the family system which disorganize the system. In the two parent poverty level family, the father loses prestige and authority for failing to carry out the breadwinner role. Again, traditional views of the family are stronger here. In the single parent poor family, you have the problem of the overburdened adult trying to carry out both parental roles. In trying to accomplish the parental task, the single parent often turns to a child to carry out parental tasks which develops structural and generational problems within the poverty level family that are described by

Minuchin. Interventions should support the parental role in order that they might perform tasks in a more competent manner, and children can be helped to attend to the tasks of childhood. The family system can then be mobilized to be brought to bear on the problem.

Rural residents tend to think in practical, concrete present oriented terms, and this mode of thinking is particularly true with the poor clients. Poorer clients are not planners in a middle class sense. The poor are more interested in meeting present needs, such as putting a meal on the table that evening, rather than in long-term planning. Problem solving done by the family revolves around activity and physical means, rather than verbal means associated with the middle class family. Goal setting to ensure engagement should concentrate on setting short concrete goals that seem practical to the client to ensure engagement.[12] Short term goals also provide immediate rewards that can act as stepping-stones to longer term goals. Client primacy in goal setting is important since it upholds the fierce pride of the rural resident.

It may also help with engagement if the agency has negative connotations for the client to meet clients in their home or on neutral ground. This may help many clients receive services

and maintain anonymity. The worker should also develop an activity approach to practice, rather than rely on verbal technologies which do not fit into the mode of problem solving of the poor client. Reid and Epstein's task oriented practice offers much help here.

Brokering is a very important role for the worker to perform. It is probably not fair to draw conclusions about a person's social functioning until their physical needs have been met. A dependable economic ground floor is needed. If not, it's difficult for the family to attend to each other's emotional needs.

The worker performs a number of other important roles. One role is that of mobilizer where the worker enables the family to mobilize its strengths, and firm up the collective family ego to deal with whatever difficulties they are experiencing.

Another role performed by the worker is that of mentor/teacher. This involves helping the family develop goals, and teaching them how to reach these goals. It also means teaching the family about expected behavior by the community.

Networking

Networking involves mobilizing those who impact on the problem. These include the family of origin, extended family, agency, and other support system within the community, be these formal or informal system. It may also involve "creating ad hoc" systems to provide resources.

Again, the family is very important in rural areas. The family may be a source of resources. In these hard economic budget cutting times, the family is being rediscovered as the "primary social agency". We should look at this view in regard to the family. Poor people come from poor families. It is unfair to ask people with little to give to other people who have little. Doing so may cause tensions and stress on the family which may accelerate its disintegration. Also, the view implies the cause for poverty lies within the family, and not within structural features of society.

An additional problem with the poverty level family is that the poor can be enmeshed and improperly separated from the family of origin. The worker might have to help parents distance themselves from their family of origin. For example, a matriarch or patriarch may exist who won't let an adult child assume the executive function of parent. Rural life supports the group over the individual. Someone who wishes to engage in nontraditional

behavior will be under pressure to conform to the group. Social workers are always in a position to help people experiment in different ways of leading their lives.

Still, the family may be in possession of resources that can help the family cope with difficulties, and what the family can provide should be explored. Just hooking adults in the family into support systems can be helpful in reducing isolation the family may be feeling.

Networking also involves coordinating various agencies which impact on the family. This may involve using the advocate role as a two way street. Advocacy is usually described as speaking for the client. Frequently the worker needs to advocate on behalf of the agency with the client. This advocacy may involve trying to convince a reluctant needy client to use a service. Another use of advocacy is with the client who is seen as deviant by the community. This client is often involved in antagonistic conflicts with the agency. The worker can attempt to mediate with these clients by pointing out the gain and losses inherent in striking out at the agency.

In rural communities, particularly where formal resources may not exist, it may be necessary for the creative worker to develop resources. For example, one often suggested resource to mobilize is the rural church. One problem with using the church is that the church members often hold conservative values, and

the members thus place pressure on their ministers to ignore problems of poverty. Also, in rural areas the minister may divide time between several congregations, and involvement in poverty issues may overload an already crowded schedule.

Other sources involved in networking include service clubs and organizations. If an individual is not seen by the community as deviant (the unworthy poor, or not truly needy). The individual may be helped through the "benefit which is a time honored rural tradition".[13] What these forms of rural intervention do is stress local pride responsibility, and tap into the rural tradition of self help.

Rural social work may be able to demonstrate innovative means of service delivery in an age of diminishing resources, and in a period of skepticism toward intervention by government. Using alternate informal means of providing services that can influence service delivery in other contexts beside rural areas.

Communities

In order to effect change within the community one must change the traditional outlook on services. Change is accomplished through the three separate social work roles of advocate, consultant, and publicist. Through these roles, the community as a whole becomes a target for change.

Advocacy involves developing community awareness of the extent of and causes of poverty, and should be done in a way that does not involve antagonizing significant elements within the community. If advocacy is seen as excessively rancorous, there is a danger that the worker will be excluded from the community. Every action taken by the worker should be evaluated in light of the effect of that action on future worker effectiveness. One can initially try the collaboration route where the worker assumes the role of consultant in regards to services with potential or actual resource providers. The worker can attempt to provide education on etiology of poverty, and information on the possibilities for interventions. The worker can also seek to have as much input as possible from all segments of the community in any planning, and in the role of consultant see that these views are heard by the powers that be in the community. The social worker also would use every opportunity possible to speak for social works traditional constituency.

If individuals in the power structure would not accept the worker as a collaborator, the worker can attempt to bargain with community leaders by attempting to have these leaders see the effect of doing nothing. Conflict type tactics can be used as a last resort.

The public image of social work is distorted. Rural people are not as impressed with credentials as are their urban counterparts. The rural resident also holds a residual view of poverty. Education is needed to inform residents about services, social work, and the needs of the poor within their midst. The worker needs to offer a more accurate picture to counter community misconceptions.

One tool for education that the rural community gives the worker is much more access to the media than the urban worker. The worker finds himself the local "expert" on poverty and service issues. It is relatively easy to get into the local paper or radio station to publicize the social work message. The worker can use the media directly or indirectly. Indirect means cultivating local media people to see views are heard. Direct means involve writing articles, press releases, letter to the editors, etc. Edward and Emilia Brawley in a paper presented at the CSWE March 1981 entitled, "Teaching social work students to use the news media for public education purposes", is a good guide for social worker who needs to develop publicist skills.

Footnotes

1. Shelley Ricchiardi, "Hidden Poor of Rural Iowa" Des Moines Register, February 28, 1980 p. 5 B

2. U.S.Bureau of the Census, 1973

3. U.S.Bureau of the Census, 1962

4. IBID

5. Statistical Abstracts of the United States (Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978) p. 137

6. See National Council of Churches, Final Summary Report of The Anti-Hunger Project. 1978

7. See, Catholic Council for Social Concern, Report On Poverty Conditions Social Action Division, Davenport, 1975.

8. See, Profile on Poor Families, Compiled by National Rural Center in Washington, D.C.

9. Mary H. Osgood. "Rural and Urban Attitudes Toward Welfare", Social Work, Vol. 22, No. 1 (January 1977) pp 41-47.

10. G. Michael Jacobsen. "Rural Communities and Community Development". from Rural Human Services: A Book of Readings. ed by H. Wayne Johnson (Itasca, Illinois. F.E.Peacock Press,1980)

11. Leon Ginsberg, "Rural Social Work", Encyclopedia of Social Work (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Social Workers, 1977), p 1230.

12. Mayer and Timms, "Clash in Perspective Between Worker and Client", Social Casework, Vol. 50 No. 1 (January, 1969) pp. 33-39.

13. G. Michael Jacobsen, Op. Cit. pp. 196-202.